

2019-LSA-Tate, Ernest: Trotsky and Cuba

Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution and defending the Cuban, Algerian and Vietnamese Revolutions

by Ernest Tate, May 6th-8th, 2019

(Remarks prepared for the Havana Conference, May 6th-8th, on the occasion of the centennial of the founding of the Third International, on the topic of “Leon Trotsky and Trotskyism”.)

Any discussion that has Trotsky's ideas as a subject, and which at the same time commemorates the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Third International, must of necessity, I believe, deal with his Theory of Permanent Revolution, what is now regarded by many scholars as his extraordinary and unique contribution to Marxist political economy, one of the most important since Marx. I wish to discuss here how he arrived at this concept, the political and economic context in Russia at the time he was working it out in 1905 (1) and how it was fundamentally based upon his insights into what role the peasantry would play in a revolutionary upheaval against Czarism. This will not be a fully comprehensive treatment of Trotsky's views, but I think it will help provide an insight into how the colonial revolution has unfolded since 1917 and how in the future the countries of the colonial world will realize their self-determination and throw off the yoke of imperialism. These ideas provided much of the theoretical framework for Trotsky's thinking when he was struggling to found the Fourth International and when he wrote its programme for its first congress in 1938. (2) It is a concept that has distinguished Trotskyism from all other left political tendencies and it helps us understand why most Trotskyist groups – especially in the advanced capitalist countries – have been at the forefront of organizing solidarity with the countries of the third world in their struggle for self-determination and resistance to imperialism.

As is now well known, early Marxists, from the time of Marx and Engels, adhered to the idea that socialism would first develop in the advanced capitalist countries where feudalism had been overthrown by bourgeois revolutions that required struggles often lasting hundreds of years, and where now as a result, a dominant proportion of their economies were comprised of manufacturing and heavy industry with a large working-class of sufficient size and political maturity, it now could contest the capitalist ruling-class and overthrow it to seize state power. As Trotsky observed, “industrialization is the driving force of the whole of modern culture, and by this token, is the only conceivable basis for socialism.” (3)

Marx's conclusion, as he stated in his *Communist Manifesto*, was that workers make up a universal class, integral to capitalist development, and that its historic destiny was to liberate itself, and thus all of mankind, from oppression and in the process emancipate all of humanity to build a new society that would be based on satisfying human need, rather than human greed, through revolution and the seizure of state power under a programme of expanded democratic rights, which would allow a new kind of state, a workers' state to come into existence, to overcome scarcity and hunger and the immediate implementation of the eight-hour day. It would be a European revolution, an uninterrupted single process, it was believed, a common illusion on the part of many socialists at that time. In its broad outline, Trotsky's theory begins with Marx and Engels' fundamental premise, with which all wings of Russian Social Democracy in the early twentieth century were in agreement: that the working class, although a

minority in feudal Russia, was part of a universal class with a specific historic role, that of its own liberation and the building of a new socialist order.

From 1904 and after, the Russian Social Democratic Party had been divided into two main ideological tendencies on the question of the character of the coming revolution. The Mensheviks believed it would be *bourgeois* and that this class would overthrow the feudal aristocracy to create the conditions for a parliamentary democracy that would allow for the emergence and growth of a mature capitalist economy, similar to what existed in the advanced capitalist countries. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, while recognizing the bourgeois character of a future revolution, advocated that its central task would be the setting up of democratic republic by means of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. Trotsky, who as a young man, first entered politics as a member of the Narodniki, a semi-anarchist organization which had attempted to represent the interests of the peasantry against the Czar, had been associated with the Menshevik faction, but in reality, organizationally stood between these groupings, looking for ways to get them to cooperate with each other in common endeavours.

Where Trotsky's thinking departed from that of both these tendencies, was in his conclusion that Russian feudalism was already ripe for socialist revolution, precisely because of its late development and inherent weaknesses, exacerbated by the penetration of its economy by foreign capital. Capitalism in Russia, he maintained, unlike that of the developed capitalist countries, would no longer able to fulfill its historic mission of introducing democratic reforms such as constitutional changes, the right to vote and a constituent assembly, the raising of wages, or the introduction of the eight-hour day and a higher standard of living. Once begun, he believed the Russian revolution would be an organic historic process of necessity and would have to move forward under the leadership of the working class, and not stop half way. In that sense, it would be uninterrupted, and if that was likely to happen in Russia because it was so backward, Trotsky concluded, the same would be true for all third world countries because their economies had developed under the similar heavy influence of western imperialism, what we call today, the American empire.

Trotsky first postulated how this would come about in his major writing from that time, "Results and Prospects, the Moving Forces of the Revolution", when he was only twenty-six years of age. In it, according to his biographer, Isaac Deutscher, he gave "an almost mathematically succinct formulation of his theory." (4) He wrote in his prison cell during his incarceration after the Tsar's crushing of the Council of Workers' Deputies in 1905, otherwise known as the Petrograd Soviet, (5) He had been its main spokes-person and leading spirit and President of its Executive Council. The 1905 Soviet would later be seen to have been dress-rehearsal for the mighty victory of 1917.

Taking advantage of his time in jail to fully concentrate on the task he had set himself, Trotsky devoted his time reading and writing and thinking through his ideas about Russian history and its unique features, a prodigious effort to deepen his understanding of what would be the role of medieval Russia's various classes in any future upheaval, a discussion he had been involved in with other Marxists long before he had ended up in a Czarist prison. Quoting Marx, and adding a touch of sarcasm, he reminded them that "Marxism is above all a method of analysis—not an analysis of texts but an analysis of social relations." (6)

The role of the peasantry in a future Russian revolution had long been debated among Russian Social Democrats (which unlike today, considered themselves to be revolutionary), with the Mensheviks advocating some kind of joint coalition of the working class and the peasantry to take control of the state, they said, but only in preparation for eventually relinquishing that power to the rising bourgeoisie to allow capitalism to fully expand, therefore increasing the productive capacity of the economy. Earlier that year, in the summer, in a foreword to one of Ferdinand Lasalle's speeches, Trotsky had already dismissed that notion, with words specifically directed at that Menshevik outlook. "It is self-evident," he wrote, "that the proletariat, as in its time the bourgeoisie, fulfills its mission supported by the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie. The proletariat leads the countryside, draws it into the movement, gives it an interest in the success of its plans. The proletariat, however, unavoidably remains the leader. This is not 'the dictatorship of the peasantry and proletariat' but *the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry*," he wrote. (His emphasis.) (7)

In prison, he examined Czarist empire's history and its singular system of social relations, writing that Russia, a vast land stretching from Europe to China, with extremely severe winters that covered much of its territory, had entered the twentieth century with a middle class strikingly feeble. Capitalism had "intruded from the West with the direct co-operation of absolutism", he wrote.(8) With a small urban population, only 13% of the total and modern towns that were the centres of commercial and industrial life, but with older towns hardly playing any economic role at all in the society, being mainly military and administrative centres for the state's services, such as tax collecting.

Compared to England and France in previous centuries, Trotsky noted, where prior to their bourgeois revolutions, large parts of their populations had been engaged in urban crafts that had helped provide social support for a rising bourgeoisie in its battles with serfdom, in Czarist Russia, only a relatively small part of the population was involved in such activities and capitalism had "appeared as a child of the state". Its few factories, had mainly been fostered by foreign investment but were more concentrated and much larger than those in Western Europe, and moreover, were owned by largely impersonal shareholding companies. Because of that -- and especially when the feebleness of the Russian bourgeoisie was taken into account -- he saw the need for an alliance between the Russian proletariat and the peasantry, that would lead to the establishment of "a dictatorship of the proletariat that would rely on the peasantry" but which could come to power earlier than in countries where capitalism had already been established.(9)

For fifty years, Trotsky wrote, Russia had been a laboratory for the creation of every kind of peasant party, but all of them had gone nowhere. In this he differed sharply with the Mensheviks and to a lesser extent with Lenin, who in his slogans, had left that question open. Trotsky conceded that in every-day normal life, a peasant party could possibly have some kind of existence, but such a political formation, because of the Russian peasantry's many links to its feudal masters, and the sharp social divisions in the countryside between rich and poor peasants, would always, when confronted with the chaos of a revolutionary crisis, cast its lot in with the ruling feudal regime, against the working class, making the idea of "a proletarian and peasant dictatorship" unrealizable. In those circumstance, he wrote, the petit-bourgeois peasant parties would become tools of the bourgeoisie against the working class. Historical experience shows, he wrote, that the Russian peasantry as a class, especially because of its

amorphousness and scattering throughout the country, is incapable of playing an independent political role in the struggle for power at the level of the state. (10)

Written during the short life of the Petrograd Soviet, where he had remained separate from the Bolshevik faction, Trotsky had begun to draw close to them in the sharp debates with the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, to the extent that the Bolshevik Central Committee reciprocated by backing him. And after the crushing of the Soviet, while he was awaiting trial in the Peter-Paul fortress, Deutscher reports that according to a fellow inmate, who was a friend of Trotsky in the prison, his “words were full of warm sympathy for the Bolsheviks, to whom he was spiritually akin, and hardly suppressed antipathy for the Mensheviks, with whom he was associated.” (11) But on the question of the role of the peasantry and whether it could ever form a political party that was capable of taking power in a future upheaval, there remained important differences. Lenin argued for a position that called for a “dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” and saw the future revolution in Russia as being bourgeois democratic in character, a view that Trotsky did not share.

Nevertheless, Deutscher tells us, Lenin continued in his efforts to win Trotsky over to the Bolsheviks and two years later, 1907, at a special Russian Social Democratic conference in London, England, organized in that city to avoid the Czarist repression in Russia, “Lenin twice emphatically acknowledged that in advocating an alliance of workers and peasants, Trotsky was on common ground with the Bolsheviks.” (12) But by the end of the conference, which lasted three weeks, that rapprochement came to an end because of bickering over other issues and it was life itself that would decide the issue, with the victory in 1917, generally confirming the correctness of the position Trotsky had long advocated.

But after the death of Lenin in 1924 and with the increasing domination of the conservative bureaucracy over the new workers’ state, the issue of the Theory of Permanent Revolution became front and centre in Stalin’s drive to undermine support for Trotsky. Using his control of the state’s apparatus to target his political enemy, Stalin, launched an extensive propaganda campaign against the Theory of Permanent Revolution, which, according to the Stalinists, was the original sin of Trotskyism, counterposing to it a system of ideas that expressed the needs of a conservative Soviet bureaucracy, formalized in the concept of socialism in one country, ideas that Trotsky vigorously rejected. “To aim to build a nationally isolated socialist society,” he argued, “means, in spite of all passing success, to pull the productive forces backward even as compared with capitalism.” (13) As we all now know, that campaign would reach a peak in 1936-38 with the slaughter and imprisonment of all Trotskyists in the USSR and culminated with Trotsky’s targeted murder in Mexico in 1940 at the hands of a Stalin assassin.

It is clear that in the run-up to the 1917 October Revolution, Trotsky had seen the future better than any of his contemporaries, and as a consequence in the immediate years following that history-changing event, the issue of what role the peasantry would play in pre-capitalist economy was no longer debated much. One result of his analysis, was to heighten the understanding among Marxists for the need for international solidarity by the working classes of the advanced capitalist countries with the struggles for liberation of the countries of the colonial and semi-colonial world.

Marxists since Marx, had always understood the pressing need for solidarity with the oppressed of the world, a conviction that the workers of the various countries have more in common with each other than

their immediate bosses and that workers' organizations, especially revolutionary ones, should devote some of their resources to building international revolutionary organizations to carry out that task. And as the Communist Manifesto, written in 1848, had declared, "In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put to an end, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put to an end. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end." (14) In 1864, Marx and Fredrick Engels took the lead in founding the International Working Men's Association, the First International. It had a short life that lasted until 1876. Because of its support for the Paris Commune of 1871, it became the object of hate by the ruling classes, contributing to its isolation. In addition, as a result of internal sectarian divisions and the destructive influence of the anarchists around Mikhail Bakunin, who had set up a secret organization within it to try and capture power, effectively, it was dissolved. Bakunin was expelled and the First International came to an end when, under Marx's guidance, its General Council was moved to New York. (15)

The Second International was much larger than the First and this time based upon the mass working class parties, mainly in the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe. It was founded in 1889 during the Centenary Celebrations for the French Revolution, but it ended in a terrible disaster, however, for the European working class when with the rise of social patriotism and jingoism that accompanied the outbreak of the 1914 First World War, its constituent parties, abandoning their principles and any pretence of internationalism, threw their support behind their respective ruling classes, going as far as voting in their legislatures for war credits in pursuit of the war.

This betrayal was opposed by the left-wing of the Second International and it organized itself to fight it. Meeting in secret in Zimmerwald, a small village outside Berne in Switzerland on September 5th, 1915, with Lenin and Trotsky among them, forty-two delegates, representing eleven countries, proclaimed the need for a new International, with Lenin urging the working classes of the belligerent and neutral nations to "turn the imperialist war into civil war." Trotsky, who was elected to the new grouping's International Committee, wrote its statement of principles and also, the now well-known, Zimmerwald Manifesto. (16) By the first week of March, 1919, barely eighteen months since the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, Lenin organized a meeting of approximately twenty delegates from a few comparatively weak socialist organizations around the world, to proclaim the founding of the Third International --or to make preliminary arrangements for it -- in effect constituting itself as the new Communist International, or Comintern as it came to be known. Trotsky, who at the time was commanding the Red Army, fighting the foreign armies of intervention, made a brief appearance, giving a short speech. He wrote its manifesto to introduce it to the world, calling for the freeing of the colonial nations. "Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia!" the manifesto proclaimed, "the hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will strike for you at the hour of your own emancipation." The following year he wrote the manifesto of its second Congress, including the twenty-one points establishing the criteria for membership, and was active in its work over the next three Congresses, until in Stalin's hands, with Trotsky and the Left Opposition expelled, it became mainly an instrument in the foreign policy of the Soviet state. Despite this dreadful turn of events, Trotsky and the Left Opposition nevertheless, still saw themselves as a loyal opposition inside the Comintern, working for its reform, and characterizing its component parties, despite their many flaws and wrong policies, as still representing the militant vanguard of the working classes world wide. (17)

All that changed, however, with the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the victory of German fascism in 1933, an historic calamity for the German working class and humanity as a whole, Trotsky wrote, and a tragic consequence of the failure of the Communist Party to combat it due to the Comintern's ultra-left policies. Up until then the loyal oppositionist had been firm in resisting calls from within its own ranks for the creation of a new International. But by October of that year, giving up all hope of reforming the Comintern, Trotsky proclaimed the need for the founding of a new International that would continue with the revolutionary policies of the first four Congresses of the Comintern, policies that were deeply imbued with his Theory of Permanent Revolution, adopted when he and Lenin and the new revolutionary Soviet government had had a major influence upon it.

The Fourth International's (F.I.) first congress took place in October, 1938. Like the first four Congresses of the Comintern, its programme also was written in the spirit of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky's, "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Working Class", otherwise known, especially in Trotskyist circles, as "The Transitional Programme", states: "But not all countries of the world are imperialist countries. On the contrary, the majority are victims of imperialism. Some of the colonial or semi-colonial countries will undoubtedly attempt to cast off the yoke of slavery. Their war will not be imperialist, but liberating. It will be the duty of the international proletariat to aid the oppressed countries in war against oppressors." (18) This helps us understand why the Fourth International during the course of its existence, would concentrate so much of its forces to defend the colonial revolution against imperialism, which reached a new intensity after the Second World War with the rise in those years of the colonies against the yoke of imperialism.

In the 1950s, for example it put considerable effort into supporting Algeria's fight for freedom from France. French colonialism, in a savage war to try and smash the independence struggle, declared its North African colony was "a department" of France, just like any other of the departments that make up that country, a position with which, it should be noted, the French Communist Party was in agreement. But after a long war in which tens of thousands of Algerians were massacred at the hands of the French military, France finally was forced in 1962 to finally concede defeat to the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.). All Trotskyist groupings backed the N.L.F. And some suffered repression because of it. Two leading members of the International Secretariat, Michel Pablo and Sal Santen, for example, were given fifteen-month prison sentences in Holland for counterfeiting and running guns to the N.L.F. Pablo later became advisor on the staff of the new government of Ahmed Ben Bella, a self-proclaimed Marxist and revolutionary.

Canadian Trotskyists were also active in that campaign. For example, two leading Canadian Trotskyists, Ross Dowson and Art Young travelled to Algeria on a fact-finding-mission and to attend an international solidarity conference in support of the new socialist regime. When they returned to Canada, they toured the country and spoke to several well-attended Algeria solidarity meetings on university campuses to provide information about what was going on in Algeria and the need for the Canadian labour movement to actively support the Ben Bella government. But by June 1965, this all came to an end when the Algerian military, under the leadership of General Houari Boumediene, staged a swift coup d'état against Ben Bella, shifting the country sharply to the right. The coup also confronted the Cuban government with a crisis because when Ben Bella had issued his appeal for international support, the government of revolutionary Cuba had been one of the first to respond, sending material aid and military

equipment and mobilizing many of its citizens to travel to that poor North African nation to provide assistance in the fields of health-care and agriculture. Cuba was forced to immediately divert its passenger planes to Algeria to bring its people home, at a time when American imperialism was increasing its efforts to over-throw Fidel Castro and putting enormous pressure on the Cuban economy to realize that aim.

However, it was the Cuban Revolution that had the greatest impact on North American Trotskyists in the early sixties and it provides an admirable example of how the F.I. was front and centre in mobilizing support for it. In the United States, the lead in this campaign was taken up by the Socialist Workers Party (S.W.P.). Two of its central leaders, Farrell Dobbs and Joe Hansen, had toured Cuba shortly after the victory in 1959, in order to obtain a first-hand assessment of the progress the Cuban people were making under the new government. That they were able to travel to Cuba at that time was a bit of a miracle because their passports had been taken away from them during the McCarthy anti-communist witch-hunt period and had only been returned after a long legal battle. The trip to Cuba was one of the first on their new legal documents. Dobbs, who had been the leader of the Minneapolis Teamsters' Union in its militant strikes in the 1930s, was the Party's Secretary; Hansen its main political theorist and editor of its journal, *International Socialist Review*. He was the Party's main intermediary with the Fourth International's centre in Brussels. (Because of U.S. law, the S.W.P. was officially barred from membership in the F.I.) During Trotsky's exile in Coyoacan, Mexico, Hansen had been assigned by the S.W.P. to live there and assist him in his work. Part of a ten-member team, he was there when Trotsky was assassinated in 1940.

After the two S.W.P. leaders returned from Cuba and reported what they had experienced, the party immediately began preparing its membership for a campaign with the objective of making defending Cuba against the American empire its central political priority. To that end both Dobbs and Hansen toured the U.S. and Canada to report to Party branches and activists on the changes they had witnessed directly and up close. Happily, this came at a time when support among the American people for Cuba was growing. A full-page advertisement soon appeared in the *New York Times*, signed by many prominent writers, intellectuals and personalities, defending Cuba's right to self-determination and demanding that the American government cease interfering in Cuban affairs. After the ad's appearance, a new defense organization in support of Cuba's right to self-determination, came into existence, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (F.P.C.C.), organized by some of those whose names had been featured in the advertisement.

One of the Committee's main functions was to try and cut across the malevolent distortions about Cuba that were regularly appearing in a hostile U.S. media, and tell the truth to the American people about what was going on there. Members of the American Communist Party and the S.W.P., historically opposed to each other, were the main organized radical forces within it. Soon it was sponsoring tours of Cuba, sometimes lasting several weeks, made up of writers, prominent intellectuals and artists, to witness the gains of the Revolution so that the participants could report to the public the truth of what they had seen. It organized many public meetings and picket-lines in support of Cuba – several thousand outside the United Nations, for example and at a time when Cuban leaders such as Fidel and Che Guevara were there. It also published many pamphlets and brochures to provide information to the American public about the progress Cuba was making in such areas as health and education. These circulated widely, an attempt to tell the American people the truth about the Revolution's many successes.

The American F.P.C.C., it has to be mentioned, while doing very good work, unfortunately had a very short life. Targeted by American security forces for repression, the U.S. State Department summoned its representatives to appear before a special Senate committee for questioning and formally classified the F.P.C.C. as “representing a foreign government”, along with the threat of forcing it to hand over its membership lists to the government. To avoid this fate and protect its members from the spying eyes of the F.B.I., the F.P.C.C. swiftly dissolved itself, a severe blow to the growing solidarity movement in the U.S.

But it was a different story in Canada. The Trotskyists there, especially after the visit of Dobbs and Hansen to Cuba, were keen to visit there as soon as possible. Verne Olson, a long-time Canadian revolutionary socialist and leader of the Socialist Educational League (S.E.L.), the F.I.’s official section in Canada, had the good fortune of being included on an early American F.P.C.C. sponsored tour. On his return, he addressed many large meetings across Canada, some with several hundred in attendance. As luck would have it, in Canada, there was a lot more popular sympathy for Cuba than in the United States. Many Canadians, resenting their southern neighbour’s interference in their own affairs, were against the bullying of Cuba, a sentiment that continues to this day, with almost a million Canadian visiting Cuba each year. That was when the Canadian equivalent of the F.P.C.C. was organized. It had a much longer life than American Committee, and in one of the most successful campaigns of its kind in the English speaking world, its members and supporters were active in trade unions and the New Democratic Party (N.D.P.), (Canada’s version of a Labour Party) to resist the efforts of the American government in pressuring the Conservative government of John Diefenbaker, to restrict trade and tourism with Cuba and to isolate it so that it would not be an inspiration to all colonial people. It turned out to have a very productive life that lasted ten years.

The organization and work of the F.P.C.C.-- a broadly based organization, comprised of members representing different view-points, in a single-issue campaign to defend the national rights and self-determination of a small Third World country such as Cuba -- was entirely in the spirit of Trotsky’s Theory of the Permanent Revolution. It became the template later in the decades of the sixties and seventies for organizing support for Third World peoples, especially in Asia in 1965, in their resistance to imperialism. It was the year the United States massively escalated its military presence in South Vietnam and launched a barbarous war on the North with threats of nuclear war, with hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers thrown into the battle against Vietnam’s struggle for independence, accompanied by a savage bombing campaign that covered the entire country waged from the air, in which tens of thousands of Vietnamese were killed. The defeat of the American forces in Vietnam became a major campaign objective for the Fourth International, as outlined in a major resolution, adopted at its 1965 Congress that concluded with a special discussion about how to organize against the war.

In the United States, as the war escalated, the S.W.P. sought to mobilize as many people as possible against the war, around the slogan of “Bring the Troops Home Now!” Making full use of the tactic of building single-issue coalitions that had been so effective in defending Cuba, it was able to play a critical role in leading a movement that grew steadily and massively as the war escalated, so well described by Fred Halstead, in his very important book about those events, “Out Now! A Participants Account of the Movement in the U.S. against the Vietnam War”, (19)

The same was true in Britain. Using similar tactics as those utilized by the North Americans, a grouping of Trotskyists of the Fourth International, the International Marxist Group (I.M.G.), took the lead in organizing the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (V.S.C.), which over the course of a relatively short period of time, working in a broad coalition, called the Ad Hoc Committee Against the War, organized a series of demonstrations outside the American Embassy in London's Grosvenor Square, each becoming increasing violent and massive as the war progressed. One the largest in the history of Britain, a demonstration of well over a hundred thousand protestors, mobilized in central London, on October, 1968, directed against the Harold Wilson Labour Government to help persuade it to resist American pressure to become more active in support of the war, including the sending of British troops. Such was the anti-war mood in Britain at the time -- which the V.S.C. had helped foment -- it would have been political suicide for Wilson to have acquiesced to the U.S. demands.

The V.S.C. was greatly assisted in this work by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (B.P.R.F.), it should be noted. It played an important part in bringing the V.S.C. into existence. Organized by the well-known British philosopher, Bertrand Russell and his secretary, Ralph Schoenman to cast a bright light on the crimes being committed by imperialism against the colonial people, the B.R.P.F. was a tireless opponent of American imperialism. To this end, and as the American actions in Vietnam became increasing savage, Russell, who over the years had won enormous respect in the Third World for his various well-publicized campaigns against the crimes of colonialism, issued an international appeal, directed at the consciousness of the world, appealing for the setting up of an international war-crimes tribunal made up of leading writers, thinkers and personalities to come together to examine the American actions in Vietnam. What came to be known as the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal, attracted some of the worlds leading intellectuals and thinkers of that time, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Laurent Schwartz, Isaac Deutscher and many others. It was also publicly supported by Fidel Castro. (He threatened to organize a Cuban sponsored public session of the Tribunal in New York). Melba Hernandez, Fidel's comrade-in-arms from the 26th of July Movement and the attack on the Moncada fortress, became an important member, and a tireless participant in its the work.

The Trotskyists of the I.M.G. in Britain, recognizing its significant propaganda value against the war, committed itself to doing all it could to make sure the Russell Tribunal would be a success and meet its objectives. It provided the day-to-day staff to carry out its work, such as the organizing of press conferences and meetings, the publishing of its bulletins and brochures, all the work such a project required, including making the arrangements for sending its many investigative teams to Vietnam – sometimes of long duration –to collect evidence of the cruel and catastrophic effects of the American military actions against the people there. The Tribunal's conclusions, adopted in its sessions in Sweden and Denmark -- after being officially banned from meeting in France and Britain -- about the criminality of the American actions, circulated widely around the world and helped to convince many of the need to end that cruel war.

These three campaigns – the Algerian, the Cuban and the Vietnamese – which activists of the F.I. committed themselves to in the period of the sixties and seventies – and which I have outlined here -- show that the idea of international solidarity was not an abstract idea for them. It was a central part of its political programme. It led it to call for actions to which it assigned resources and members, setting a powerful example for others about what could be achieved if left wing forces would unite to resist

imperialism. For example, and more recently, the massive opposition in Britain against the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was organized and led by the Socialist Workers Party there, who regard themselves as Trotskyist but are not part of the Fourth International. It seems, they remembered very well their history of fighting against the war in Vietnam and how that was carried out. The same was true in Canada, where the International Socialists, who also consider themselves to be Trotskyists, organized some of the largest demonstrations ever seen in the country, against that war. In this sense, Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, ever since it was written in 1905 in Petrograd in a Czarist prison, has stood the test of time and maintains its validity, even today. Hopefully, it will inspire a new generation of activists, especially in North America, to build solidarity with Cuba as it now faces increasing disruption at the hands of the American empire.

Notes:

- 1) It was the year when the Russian Tsarist empire had entered a profound, social and political crisis. The previous year, in 1904, in a total surprise to the world powers at that time – and to the Russian autocracy – Japan had declared war on Russia, defeating it and destroying its navy in the Far East, a great humiliation for the absolutist regime, leading to a deep crisis of confidence in it and the beginning of a radicalization that had never been seen before. Early in 1905, protests swept the Empire over shortages and high food prices. Workers in the giant Putilov engineering works in Petrograd walked off the job and soon other factories were at a standstill. That's when the notorious Father Gapon, who in cooperation with the Czarist authorities, set up his Workers Assembly and led over 20,000 workers in a peaceful protest to deliver a petition to the Czar at his Winter Palace, only to be met by the Czar's Imperial troops, who opened fire on the assembled crowd. In Russian history, it became known as "Bloody Sunday". Hundreds, if not thousands were slaughtered and in the outrage that swept the country following it – which included a mutiny on the battleship Potemkin – the Grand Duke Sergei, the Governor General of Moscow was assassinated.
- 2) Section: "Aiding Non-Imperialist Countries" in "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Working Class", by Leon Trotsky, otherwise known, especially in Trotskyist circles as, "The Transitional Programme".
- 3) P 21, "Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects" by Leon Trotsky, Pioneer Publishers, 254pp, 1965.
- 4) P 150, "The Prophet Armed", Volume 1, by Isaac Deutscher, Oxford University Press.
- 5) The Petrograd Soviet came into existence in the midst of a general strike, in October, 1905, which had erupted when the city's printers suddenly hit the streets demanding higher wages, shorter working hours and constitutional freedom. Rapidly spreading beyond the printing trades to other industries and then into the provinces, the strike grew into a massive general-strike which spread throughout Russia, shaking the Czarist regime to its foundations, taking the Russian Social Democratic Party (with its two factions, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks) and Social Revolutionaries, completely by surprise, most of whose leaderships had been in exile in Western Europe. It was the first appearance in feudal Russia of a Soviet. It lasted only fifty days however, before being declared illegal and crushed by the regime.
- 6) P196, Trotsky, "Results and Prospects."
- 7) P202, Op. cit.
- 8) P183, Op. cit.

- 9) P65, Op. cit.
- 10) P156, Deutscher, vol 1,
- 11) P146, Op. cit.
- 12) P178, Op. cit.
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